DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 211 941 CS 006 448

AUTHOR Abrams, Jules C.
TITLE Can Public Schools Meet the Literacy Needs of the Handicapped? Literacy: Meeting the Challenge.
INSTITUTION Office of Education (DHEW), Washington, D.C. Right to Read Program.
PUB DATE 80
NOTE 13p.; Paper presented at the National Right to Read Conference (Washington, DC, May 27-29, 1978). For related documents see ED 190 997 and CS 006 442-449.
AVAILABLE FROM Superintendent of Documents, Government Printing Office, Washington, DC 20402.

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Learning Disabilities; *Literacy; Mental Disorders; *Physical Disabilities; Reading Difficulties; *Reading Instruction; *Remedial Instruction; *Teacher Certification
IDENTIFIERS International Reading Association

ABSTRACT

The seventh of eight related documents, this booklet is part of a series of papers presented at the 1978 National Right to Read Conference examining issues and problems in literacy. In examining the literacy needs of the handicapped, this booklet notes diagnostic imprecision and political ineffectiveness as disadvantages in adopting the single generic label "learning disabilities." The paper first presents the etiological diversity of reading and learning disorders by citing examples of those emanating from sociopsychological factors and then those emanating from psychophysiological factors. It next presents the approach to labelling, developed by the Disabled Reader Committee of the International Reading Association, that involves using the generic term "learning disorders," but restricting its application to so-called "hard-core" children. After indicating the preparation individuals need to work with these children and the failure of current certification programs to provide it, the paper discusses the practical difficulties of obtaining financial support for learning-disabled children unless they are specifically labelled. It concludes by looking forward to a form of certification that will accommodate both general expertise in learning disabilities and special expertise in reading skills. (HTH)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED211941

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION
CENTER (ERIC)

This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official NIE position or policy.

LITERACY: MEETING THE CHALLENGE

Can Public Schools Meet the Literacy Needs of the Handicapped?

Jules C. Abrams

CS006488

The material in this booklet was prepared pursuant to a contract with the Right to Read Program, U.S. Office of Education, Department of Health, Education, and Welfare. Contractors undertaking such work are encouraged to express freely their professional judgments. The content does not necessarily reflect Office of Education policy or views.

The material in this booklet was presented at the National Right to Read Conference, Washington, D.C., May 27–29, 1978. The material was edited by the staff of the National Institute of Advanced Study which conducted the Conference under contract from the U.S. Office of Education.

FOREWORD

A major goal of the Right to Read Program has been to disseminate information about the status of literacy education, successful products, practices and current research finding in order to improve the instruction of reading. Over the years, a central vehicle for dissemination have been Right to Read conferences and seminars. In June 1978, approximately 350 Right to Read project directors and staff from State and local education and nonprofit agencies convened in Washington, D.C. to consider Literacy: Meeting the Challenge.

The conference focused on three major areas:

- examination of current literacy problems and issues
- assessment of accomplishments and potential resolutions regarding literacy issues; and
- exchange and dissemination of ideas and materials on successful practices toward increasing literacy in the United States.

All levels of education, preschool through adult, were considered.

The response to the Conference was such that we have decided to publish the papers in a series of individual publications. Additional titles in the series are listed separately as well as directions for ordering copies.

SHIRLEY A. JACKSON
Director
Basic Skills Program

LITERACY MEETING THE CHALLENGE

A Series of Papers Presented at the National Right to Read Conference May 1978

Assessment of Reading Competencies
Donald Fisher

How Should Reading Fit Into a Pre-School Curriculum
Bernard Spodex

Relating Literacy Development to Career Development
Allen B. Moore

Private Sector Involvement in Literacy Efforts

"The Corporate Model for Literacy Involvement"
Lily Fleming

"Reading Alternative: Private Tutoring Programs"
Daniel Bassill

"Building Intellectual Capital: The Role of Education in Industry"
Linda Stoker

Who is Accountable for Pupil Illiteracy?
Paul Tractenberg

Publishers' Responsibilities in Meeting the Continuing Challenge of Literacy
Kenneth Komoski

Can Public Schools Meet the Literacy Needs of the Handicapped?
Jules C. Abrams

The Basic Skills Movement: Its Impact on Literacy
Thomas Sticht

Literacy: Competency and the Problem of Graduation Requirements
William G. Spady

Projections In Reading

"Teaching Reading in the Early Elementary Years"
Dorsey Hammond

"Adult Literacy"
Oliver Patterson

"Reading Programs: Grades Seven Through Twelve"
Harold Herber

SUMMARY

Overview

Despite the indignities and potential abuses attendant upon the practice of labelling reading disabilities, the alternative of adopting the single generic label "learning disabilities" has two large disadvantages: diagnostic imprecision and political ineffectiveness. This paper first presents the etiological diversity of reading and learning disorders by instancing those emanating from sociopsychological factors and then those emanating from psychophysiological factors. It next presents the approach to labelling developed by the Disabled Reader Committee of the International Reading Association, an approach that involves using the generic term "learning disorders," but restricting its application to the so-called "hard-core" child. After indicating the preparation individuals need to work with this child and the failure of current certification programs to provide it, the paper discusses the practical difficulties of obtaining financial support for learning-disabled children unless they are specifically labelled. It concludes by looking forward to a form of certification that will accommodate both general expertise in learning disabilities and special expertise in reading skills.

Types of Reading Disorders

Depending upon their etiology, reading and learning disorders may require different types of intervention. One can construct an arbitrary dichotomy between those considered to emanate from external, sociopsychological factors and those considered to emanate from internal, psychopysiological factors. The former category includes adverse educational situations—the cause of the vast majority of reading problems. It also includes problems in the child's home situation, both concomitants of cultural deprivation and parental attitudes that induce resentment, guilt, and a sense of inadequacy. The latter includes the child's general physical condition and specific visual, auditory, endocrinological, and neurological disorders.

Labels

Though labels may dehumanize, stigmatize, and moreover, exclude from treatment children who need it, they are an inevitable outcome of thorough diagnosis, and effective treatment depends upon valid diagnosis. Furthermore, legislators do not incline to provide financial support for children whose handicaps are not precisely labelled. Therefore, representing

the Disabled Reader Committee of the International Reading Association, the author proposes the adoption of the label "Learning Disorders." On the one hand, it would encompass all severe learning disorders, though reading disability would probably be the most important. On the other hand, it would refer only to the so-called "hard-core" child.

Competency To Treat Severe Reading Disabilities

Conventional certification programs have not prepared specialists to treat the "hard-core" child with a reading disability. Instead, the competencies required have been divided between reading specialists, whose general background is elementary and secondary education, and learning disability teachers, whose general background is special education. The one may know little about handicapped children, the other little about reading. Individuals interested in working with "hard-core" children must familiarize themselves with areas outside their original training. The author offers a partial list of areas they should study. Organizations are now working to specify the competencies that would qualify individuals who are prepared to deal with severe reading disabilities and who are both generalists and specialists. The federation of such organizations would help break down the disfunctional dichotomy between reading and learning disabilities.

CAN THE SCHOOLS MEET THE LITERACY NEEDS OF THE HANDICAPPED?

In the twenty years or so that I have been involved with severe reading and related learning disabilities, the professional shifts of opinion have been alternately amusing, frightening, ridiculous, and tragic. Ten or fifteen years ago when a child with a severe reading disability was brought to a clinic or to a private practitioner, the odds were extremely high that he would be labelled as having some type of personality disturbance. There was absolutely nothing in the psychological and psychoanalytic literature that could not be used to explain the etiology and the sustenance of the reading disability. Thus, we heard such terms as maternal dominance, the passive father, unresolved oedipal strivings, the passive-aggressive child, the oral character, etc.,—all of these "labels" to explain the nature of the reading disability and why the child could not learn. No wonder that so many teachers became frightened to even approach a child who had been so labelled—after all, she might upset the already flimsy structure of the child's personality apparatus. Better to let him continue to have the reading difficulties—at least he would be a happy nonreader.

A number of years ago the pendulum shifted—and how it shifted! Slowly, like a sleeping dragon that had been awakened, this basically amorphous but powerful concept of organicity reared its ugly head. Now the teacher (and the diagnostician) suddenly found himself enveloped in a whole new set of labels. According to where you were geographically, the child could be classified variously as having minimal cerebral dysfunction, minimal brain damage, hyperactivity, perceptual handicap, primary reading retardation, dyslexia, and even minimal desynchronization syndrome. If the teacher was fearful before, what did she feel now? It was as if she had to be a physician or perhaps a neurologist to work with the child. More significantly, we had simply found a whole new set of wastepaper basket terms behind which we could conceal our ignorance and our inability to deal with the basic educational problems of the child.

Perhaps as a reaction to the indiscriminate use of such labels as the ones mentioned earlier, some educators (supported, in part, by other professional disciplines and even more strongly by special interest groups) have proposed a single unitary label of "learning disabilities." While the drive to move away from the often inaccurate "labelling" of children is praiseworthy, the conceptualization of a circumscribed area of learning disability is more than questionable. There are so many different kinds of reading and learning disorders, and each may require different types of intervention.

We could, for example, construct an arbitrary dichotomy based upon the possible etiologies of severe reading disability and related learning disorders. On the one hand, we could include all aspects which are considered to emanate from influences external to the child (sociopsychological factors). In this category, we would include such causes as adverse educational situations. Probably the greatest cause for the milder learning problems is to be found in the group of conditions which might be classified as educational. The vast majority of reading problems are brought about by ineffective teaching or some other deficiency in the educational situation. Once the child has begun to have some problem in school, his deficiencies are exacerbated because he does not have the skills to acquire new learning. In turn, he feels inadequate and frustrated, which interferes with his ability to attend and to concentrate and increases the probability that he will not learn.

The major environmental situation affecting the child's progress in learning is the school environment. However, there may be disturbances in the child's current home situation which may have a devastating effect upon his learning ability. Often a child from a low socioeconomic environment does not have an adult model with whom he can identify and who appears to be cathected to learning. Most children want to emulate adults who command power, status, and prestige. Children desire these intangible goals but often do not know how to obtain them. The child from a low socioeconomic environment often does not see his parent as someone who values intellectual mastery.

Some children experience difficulty in learning because of inadequate cognitive stimulation during the early years. The culturally deprived child does not experience the same impetus to ego development as is experienced by the child from a more stimulating environment. On the whole, the child has had limited contact with the "outside world." He has experienced less opportunity to listen to the kind of complex speech that will enhance his own vocabulary development. His conceptual repertoire is quite limited.

In addition to the limited conceptual background, children from culturally deprived areas are often not prepared for the kind of learning attitude which is necessary for success in the classroom. There is little motivation on their part to conform to the rules and regulations which are so foreign to their own upbringing. They tend to react to this unnatural situation with disdain, suspiciousness, and an unwillingness to sublimate their own impulses.

The attitudes of the parental figures toward the child play an extremely influential role in determining his receptivity to the learning process. There are families in which undue emphasis has been placed upon the necessity for school achievement. The child very early in life learns that it is extremely important for him to achieve in order to maintain an adequate relationship with the mother figure. When a child begins to despair of ever completely gaining his parents' approval, he may withdraw from the struggle.

Some children unconsciously use learning, or rather not learning, as a weapon to express resentment toward the parental figures. It is an effective weapon and one over which the child maintains complete control. Nobody can make him learn if he does not want to. The older child who is angry at his parents may use nonlearning as a two-edged sword—he punishes his parents and also himself. He feels so guilty because of his resentment toward the parents that he must appease his guilt through self-punishment.

In the second major category, we may consider those etiological factors which primarily emanate from within the child (psychophysiological factors). In this area, we would include the child's general physical status, both visual and auditory problems, endocrinological factors, as well as disorders of the central nervous system. It should be kept in mind that an early insult to the central nervous system constitutes a severe threat to the integrity of the organism and may bring about deficiencies in the primary ego apparatuses which, in turn, interfere with the child's ability to interact with his environment in an adaptive manner.

It would be extremely tempting at this point to simply recommend that we abolish all labels that dehumanize and stigmatize both children and their families. But herein lies the core of the professional dilemma. How can we do this without taking away the very support that has allowed us to provide assistance for children with special learning needs?

The use of noxious categorical labels in the public schools with categories too narrow and too inflexible exclude many children who desire admission to many programs. There are places in this country where children who have severe reading problems cannot be taught by the reading teacher because, according to certain criteria, the children have to be seen by the learning disability specialist.

Professionals, particularly those trained in a medical orientation, argue that labels do after all refer to problems. Labels are an inevitable outcome of a thorough diagnosis of a child's specific strengths and weaknesses. I myself have written elsewhere that "diagnosis is all too important an undertaking to be vitiated by a superficial eclectic approach. The choice of intervention and the efficacy of treatment depends on the validity of the diagnosis." Most important of all, very often these handicapped children must be identified and labelled if we are going to have the clout to influence legislators to provide necessary financial support.

As Chairman of the Disabled Reader Committee of the International Reading Association, I have become acutely aware of the tremendous difficulties in wrestling with the whole concept of labelling. The men and women of this committee have literally sat for hours agreeing and yet disagreeing. I am talking now about men and women who represent a variety

of professional disciplines and who have had extraordinary experience in the field of reading disability. And yet all of us have had to recognize how very difficult it is to come up with a solution that will guard against using labels that categorize children, and yet at the same time not jeopardize the funds that must be made available for these children in order for them to receive appropriate treatment.

I would like to present a method of approaching this problem which represents the thinking of the Disabled Reader Committee as well as a number of other organizations that deal with severe learning problems. I would suggest that the broad general heading be "Learning Disorders," and that we refer here to the so-called "hard-core" child. In actuality, there are different kinds of severe learning disorders. Probably the most important type of learning disorder would be severe reading disability. At the same time, we must accept the fact that there are some children who have learning disorders which are not reading disabilities. Included, therefore, in the broad general heading of learning disorders would be arithmetic problems, language problems, and the so-called Strauss syndrome. In the latter category, we consider those children who are hyperactive, hyperdistractible, disinhibited, and who generally have problems in impulse control.

The move at this point in history in terms of teacher certification in special education is toward approval of university programs by the State Department of Education. There is a move away from the simple accumulation of credits and more looking at competencies necessary to teach children who have severe learning disabilities. Historically, the training of the reading specialist has come out of the regular elementary and secondary education departments where its certification has merely been through the regular Department of Education. On the other hand, the learning disability teacher or specialist certification requirements have come out of the field of special education. This has raised definite problems. For example, if we want to hire a teacher in Pennsylvania, we must hire a teacher who has a degree in special education. This teacher may have had one course in the teaching of reading and knows very, very little about how to teach a child with a severe reading disability. This, of course, is ridiculous. Any person who is certified as a learning disability specialist should have had considerable training in the area of reading disability.

For those individuals who are interested in working with these hard-core youngsters, whether the original training has been in reading or has been in another area, it is important to learn something about the other areas. People who have been primarily trained in oral language disorders should learn a great deal more about reading difficulties. The psychologist who has been trained in behavioral management should learn more about language problems. Reading people must also add to their own armamentarium.

The following constitutes a partial list of areas which must be studied: the differences between articulation and developmental disorders; dialect and developmental disorders; and syntax and semantics. More must be learned about child development, language development, ego development, motor development, social development, and personal development. We should learn more about the concept of localization of brain function. We should know more about the anatomy and physiology of the visual and auditory systems to identify peripheral and central dysfunction. We should learn about stress-induced visual problems versus organic visual problems. We should know something about the difference between perceptual training and visual training.

About fifteen years ago a definition for learning disabilities was proposed. It was about fifteen words long. About one year later there was another definition offered which was 25 words long. The most recent definition on learning disabilities is something like 75 or 76 words long. We are not really learning more about learning disabilities; we are simply having more difficulty in defining the condition. I would be very tempted to try to eliminate all labels in working with children. But again, we have to be more practical.

There are many States in this country that provide financial support for children who have "learning disabilities." In Pennsylvania, for example, if a child is classified as neurologically impaired, the parents are entitled to a sum of $3,500 a year for the child's education. The child may go to any private school in Pennsylvania where there are the special facilities to work with these children, and the parents will receive $3,500 for his special education. If the child is classified as socially and emotionally disturbed, the parents are helped to the tune of $3,300. I do not know why a child who is socially and emotionally disturbed is worth $200 less than a child who is neurologically impaired, particularly since it is very often extremely difficult to distinguish between the two.

In essence what we are doing is allowing legislators to diagnose our children. This is not good. Yet I am certain that many would like for children to have this kind of help. Or perhaps public schools should simply have the facilities to provide for the special needs of children with severe learning problems. If the legislature is asked for a bill which would appropriate money for children with special educational needs, it tends to be apathetic. On the other hand, if the legislature is asked for money for children with cerebral aegenesis, it may respond with greater enthusiasm.

The label is important obviously. I wish there were a system where children who have these disabilities could get the help they need, without the stigma of a label. But at our present level of ignorance, unless we can find some kind of exotic label, these youngsters are not going to be provided with the support which is needed to overcome their deficiencies.

In summary, the person equipped to deal with severe reading disability may be both a generalist in terms of overall knowledge and a specialist in terms of understanding efficient reading and how to build skills. The requirements and the competencies for this kind of generalist are being worked out right now by many different organizations. Hopefully, we will soon have a federation which will allow us to move away from this conflict of reading disabilities vs. learning disabilities.

John Dewey noted over a half century ago that genuine equality of educational opportunity is absolutely incommensurate with equal treatment, because people differ from one another in many significant ways. A loving parent treats his children differently because he knows each child is unique. It was this insight that led Dewey to make a remark which might well become a motto for all of us as educators. "What the best and wisest parent wants for his own child, that must the community want for all its children. Any other ideal for our schools is narrow and unlovely; unless acted upon, it destroys our democracy."

None of us should be willing to settle for anything less.

☆ U.S. GOVERNMENT PRINTING OFFICE: 1980 O—302-475